

Firearm Ownership and Safe Storage in New York State

Bradley Hutton
John Fuhrman

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This report describes the extent and prevalence of firearm ownership and unsafe firearm storage practices in New York State. The data were collected through a state-added module of questions included in the 1994 BRFSS.

The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System—Summary Report is published quarterly. Issues will contain brief summaries on one or more of the risk factors included in each year's survey. Occasionally, issues will summarize special surveys, analysis of trends and more in-depth discussion of specific risk topics. Copies may be obtained by contacting:

Thomas A. Melnik, Dr.PH
BRFSS Coordinator
New York State Department of Health
Bureau of Chronic Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance
Empire State Plaza, Rm. 565, Corning Tower
Albany, NY 12237-0679

or by phone or electronic mail:

(518) 474-2460 or tmm02@health.state.ny.us

Barbara A. DeBuono, MD, MPH, Commissioner,
New York State Department of Health
Kenneth Spitalny, MD, Director,
Center for Community Health
David Momrow, MPH, Acting Director,
Division of Chronic Disease Prevention and
Adult Health
Thomas A. Melnik, DrPH, Editor,
BRFSS Coordinator

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Bradley Hutton, MPH and John Fuhrman, Bureau of Injury Prevention

Each year, more than 2,300 New York State (NYS) residents are killed and at least 5,300 are hospitalized as a result of firearm-related injuries. Of the firearm-related fatalities in 1992, 75 percent were homicides, 23 percent were suicides, 1 percent were unintentional, and 1 percent had an unknown intent. Beginning in 1991, firearms caused more deaths to NYS residents than motor vehicle crashes, which currently cause approximately 1,500 deaths each year.^{1,2}

Ready availability of firearms is often cited as the primary contributing factor to firearm injuries and deaths. Past surveys have estimated that between 38 and 49 percent of all households contain at least one firearm.^{3,4} Research has demonstrated an increased risk of suicide,^{5,6} homicide⁷ and unintentional firearm-related death⁸ as a result of having a firearm in the home. While gun owners state that protection is the most common reason for owning a gun³, a firearm kept in the home is 12 times more likely to be used to kill a friend or acquaintance than a stranger.⁹

Advocates of gun control cite correlations between areas with high rates of firearm-related deaths and high rates of gun ownership as evidence of the need to control and/or ban firearm ownership, but the impact that firearm access legislation has had on crime and mortality rates is still under debate. In the meantime, the issue of firearm access and its contribution to the incidence of firearm-related injuries and death has become an extremely volatile issue of contention.

Any consideration of interventions that seek to limit, regulate, or even document the possession of firearms will inevitably raise legal, ethical, and political questions. A program that seeks to implement any of these interventions should consider the intensity of this political controversy and its potential impact.¹⁰

While only 1 percent of the total firearm-related deaths to NYS residents were unintentional, strategies that prevent them may be easier to implement than those that aim to prevent intentional firearm injuries. Unintentional firearm-related injury countermeasures often focus on engineering and

educational interventions. Both have raised less contention than prevention approaches that restrict firearm access. Child-proof modifications to firearms and educational interventions to teach owners safe methods of storage and operation of firearms are promising, and less controversial interventions to reduce the rates of unintentional firearm-related injuries. Gun owners¹¹ and the American Medical Association¹² agree on the need for safety class requirements for all owners of firearms. In order to investigate opportunities for reducing firearm-related morbidity and mortality in NYS that will be embraced by both those in support of and opposed to gun control strategies, respondents to the 1994 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey in NYS were asked about firearm ownership and safe storage.

Methods

In 1994, a state-added module was developed and included in New York State's BRFSS to determine the prevalence of firearm ownership and safe storage in NYS. The following questions were asked of all respondents of the survey in 1994.

The next few questions are about firearms. We are only interested in firearms that work. We are not interested in antique firearms or other firearms that are nonfunctional.

1. Are there any firearms in your home, including the basement, garage or any buildings on your property?
2. Are all of the firearms in your home stored in a locked place or stored with a trigger lock? (A safety feature is not a trigger lock.)
3. Is the ammunition for the firearms stored in a locked place separate from the firearms?

Data from the above module were analyzed to determine the prevalence of firearm ownership and safe storage in New York State in 1994. All percentages were weighted to reflect the age and sex distribution of the NYS population in 1994.

Results

Of the 2,267 noninstitutionalized NYS residents over the age of 18 who responded to the firearms module, 427 (20.6%) reported that their household contained a firearm. Male respondents were more likely to report firearm ownership than females (26.1% vs. 15.7%). Ownership increased with increasing age, from 16.4 percent among 18-24 year olds to a peak of 26.7 percent among respondents aged 45-54 years old. Ownership increased with household income from 14.1 percent among respondents with an annual household income of less than \$10,000 to 27.6 percent of those with an annual income of between \$50-75,000. Families with children in the household also displayed similar rates of firearm ownership, 20.1 percent among households with children under age five, 23.4 percent with children aged 5-12 and 25.7 percent with teenagers aged 13-17.

Of the 427 respondents who reported owning a firearm, 38.0 percent reported some form of unsafe storage, where unsafe storage is defined as either failing to lock all firearms or failing to store ammunition separately in a locked place. Specifically, 28.1 percent of respondents said that they currently did not store all of the firearms in a locked place

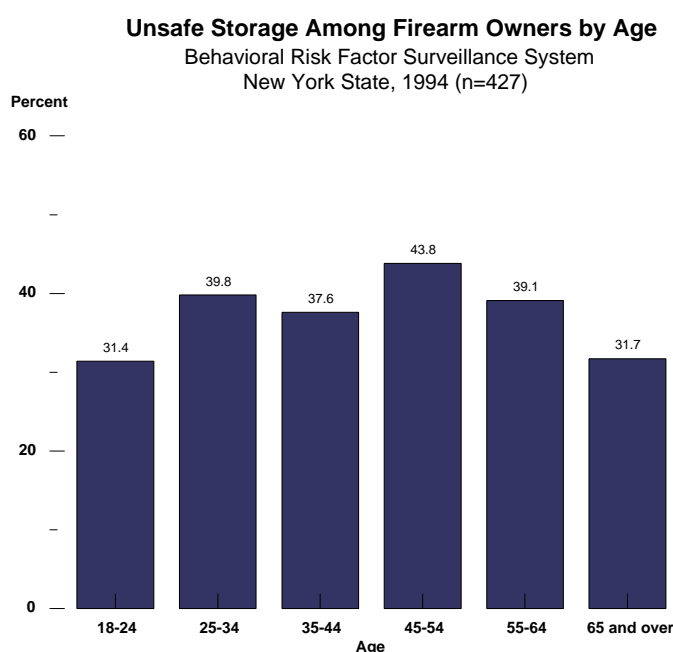
(or with a trigger lock) and 24.0 percent failed to store ammunition in a locked place separate from the firearm. Unsafe storage varied by age and was highest among those 45-54 years of age (Figure 1).

Unsafe storage of firearms and ammunition occurred across all age groups (Figure 1), and was more common among more educated respondents; 33.7 percent of respondents with a high school education or less reported unsafe storage of a firearm, as compared with 43.0 percent of those with at least some college education. Households with young children had high rates of unsafe firearm storage. Forty percent of the firearm-owning households with at least one child less than five years of age reported some form of unsafe storage that would place their children at increased risk of a firearm-related injury and/or death.

Conclusions

The results of this survey demonstrate a need for increased education on safe firearm storage practices among gun owners in New York State to prevent future firearm-related injuries and deaths. The 20.6 percent statewide firearm ownership rate determined in this survey is lower than national estimates reported in the literature^{3,4}. This may reflect an increased potential for a reporting bias in phone surveys that ask questions about potentially controversial subjects like firearm ownership. Respondents of this survey were also unlikely to have reported illegal firearm ownership. The survey results are, therefore, likely to be an underestimate of the true ownership rates in NYS.

These biases aside, respondents who did report owning a firearm, had an unacceptably high rate of unsafe firearm and/or ammunition storage practices, an estimated 38 percent of firearm owners statewide. It is plausible that owners of illegal guns will be even less likely to store firearms and ammunition in a locked place with the ammunition stored separately from the firearm. The 38 percent estimate of unsafe storage for all firearms is, therefore, likely to be an underestimate as well. Children are at particularly high risk for a firearm-related injury or death, because they often do not perceive guns as dangerous. The finding that 40 percent of households with a firearm and children less than five years of age have some form of unsafe storage presents a tremendous opportunity for public health intervention. Many injuries and deaths may be prevented in the state and nation by developing interventions to educate gun owners on the safest storage and use of firearms.



Source: NYS DOH, Bureau of Injury Prevention
BRFSS 1994

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